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## Tempest over a 'think piece'

Somewhere in Washington there's a public official who needs to have his head examined, go to jail, or both. He is the character who leaked a secret Pentagon staff study suggesting that the U.S. might give China extensive military assistance for use in a war against the Soviet Union. The study, which was obtained by the New York Times, discussed the possibility of forming a virtual military alliance with the Chinese, including joint military exercises and the construction of modern arms factories.

Making common military cause with the world's largest communist country is certainly a hair-raising thought. But it's not really the Pentagon study that is disturbing. It's the leak.

We can understand the necessity of Pentagon planning for every contingency, and we believe Pentagon spokesman Tom Ross when he says that the study was merely a "think piece" that presages no change in our policy against giving arms to China.

Pentagon archives probably contain plans for all sorts of unlikely eventualities, from invading Mexico to mining the Panama Canal. But such plans are supposed to be held in the strictest secrecy. A reasonably friendly country like Mexico would become decidedly unfriendly on learning that we had a detailed scenario for refighting the Mexican War. An unfriendly country like the Soviet Union could become downright dangerous.

The Russians' fear of the Chinese is so deeply felt as to be almost psychotic. In such circumstances the disclosure of plans contemplating a NATO-China two-front war of annihilation is a provocation that could have frightening consequences. Saying that it's nothing but a "think piece" is not likely to assuage Russians — they can't think straight about China and two-front wars even if Pentagon planners can. The kind of

thinking going on right now in paranoid Kremlin corridors is likely to be along the lines of a preemptive nuclear attack on China, which the Soviets have seriously considered in the past.

The disclosure of information as sensitive as that contained in the study presumably would result in the dismissal or indictment of the responsible official. But we won't hold our breath waiting for that to happen. The leak obviously was authorized at a high level of government, probably in the White House.

The only apparent motive for such an action is the administration's desire to flex its muscles over the Soviet troops in Cuba. Having created a phantom Cuban crisis, the administration would evidently like to create a phantom war threat to resolve it. The idea presumably would be to leak the study, sending the Kremlin pulse rate to 120 a minute, and then solemnly declare it only a "think piece". The Russians would be nicely rattled, maybe even rattled enough to withdraw the troops.

But what if Mr. Brezhnev's heart doesn't stop pounding? What if he and his colleagues don't believe the official explanations or don't credit unofficial motives? What if the episode convinces them that their fear of fears, war from both east and west, is on its way to being realized?

The initial Soviet reaction was indeed disbelief of official U.S. denials. Pravda angrily charged that "The provocateurs, in the guise of researchers, do not consider it necessary to hide their plans."

The newspaper noted that Secretary of State Cyrus Vance said the study did not reflect a policy change, but it added,

"If that is so, then the question arises: Why did the Pentagon strategists elaborate such recommendations?"

It is that kind of dark, brooding doubt that sets Soviet minds to pondering the nuclear button. And that is something we'd rather not think about.